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12 January 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Implications of a Certain Hypothetical Development in Laos

1. Assumption. It is assumed that Souvanna Phouma -- for whatever reason -- publicly calls for a total bombing halt in Laos and for cessation of ARVN ground incursions as well. It is assumed that the US (and Saigon) refuse to comply with Souvanna's requests. What would be the implications of this situation?

2. The most significant immediate problem would arise in Laos. Souvanna's move would almost certainly lead to a political confrontation with the Lao military leadership and associated rightist clans who presently tolerate him only at the insistence of the US. In the assumed circumstances, however, they would foresee only US approval for acting against Souvanna. (There is some chance, of course, that the generals would first sound out the US Mission in Vientiane.)

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3. If Souvanna were removed swiftly and without excessive fuss, the political situation might soon return to what passes for normalcy in Laos. But if the generals were clumsy, or public opposition unexpectedly great, *their* actions might easily lead to prolonged civil unrest in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and other major towns. If Souvanna's supporters somehow prevailed, a breakaway rightist regime might be established in southern Laos.

4. Much would depend, of course, on the circumstances attending Souvanna's statements. For example, if it were made in the context of a reasonably attractive deal with Hanoi and at a time of unmitigated military disaster for Laos, Souvanna might find support for his move even in Lao military circles. For the most part, however, the generals would view Souvanna's move to accommodate the communists as a threat to themselves, their positions, and to the continued flow of US funds and equipment to the Lao armies.

SECRET

SECRET

5. The short-term military implications of any rightist takeover in Laos are largely conjectural. Hanoi might proceed as before, willing to gear its campaign to its minimal ^{UM} political requirements in Laos. But it might also see opportunity and advantage in casting off self-imposed restraints and seizing such points as Luang Prabang or Vang Vieng and setting up a rival Lao government.

6. One of the international political consequences of the assumed scenario would be the increased credibility of Hanoi's longstanding contention that only the US stands as an obstacle to peaceful resolution of the war in Laos. Opponents of the US position -- foreign and domestic -- would doubtless make political mileage in their continuing effort to pressure the US into cessation of all bombing in Indochina.

7. There is a related consideration. The US move, implying as it does the rejection of Souvanna, could be interpreted as a rejection as well of the Geneva-Zurich structure of neutrality and tripartism to which the US

-3-

SECRET

SECRET

has been officially committed for almost a decade. The Soviets and the Chinese, in particular, might view the developments as a sign of US abandonment of the negotiating path with regard to Laos. Soviet attitudes might be reflected in the actions of Poland and India on the ICC.

8. The implications for US allies in Indochina would vary. Saigon's major concern, of course, would be the congressional reaction in the US. Aside from this, Saigon would chalk up Souvanna's action as a political-propaganda setback likely to have some adverse impact on domestic morale, but the South Vietnamese would foresee no major or immediate military consequences so long as the US appeared firmly committed to continued air action in the southern corridor. Souvanna's statements regarding ARVN ground incursions would probably cause little concern. It would be ignored; and, in any case, Saigon probably plans nothing of the sort beyond relatively small harassing operations.

-4-

SECRET

SECRET

9. The implications would be much more serious in Cambodia. Phnom Penh's leaders share certain attitudes with the RLG. Like the Lao, they see Cambodia's salvation ultimately in some sort of great-power understanding regarding their independence and neutrality. They would, therefore, pay close attention in the assumed situation to any sign that the powers were moving away from accommodation in Indochina toward some sort of last-ditch military struggle. At the same time, the Cambodian leadership would also grow more fearful of an eventual reversal of US bombing policy in Laos, a move which would leave Cambodia even more exposed to North Vietnamese infiltration, ~~and which might easily hasten communist success in toppling the present anti-communist Cambodian regime.~~

10. Thailand would also be affected. Bangkok sees Laos as its first line of defense and has helped defend it. Souvanna's policy shift would compel the Thai to review their own military position in Laos. Almost certainly, Bangkok's first step would be to assist in any right-wing Lao effort to oust Souvanna. And

SECRET

SECRET

continuation of US bombing in Laos would be insisted upon. Over time, however, the principal problem would arise in Bangkok itself where Souvanna's action would be seen as a clear setback for US policy in Southeast Asia, hence another reason for top Thai leaders and would-be leaders to question the value of the US alliance.

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11. Conclusions. The assumed US rejection of a Souvanna request to cease all bombing in Laos would probably have no immediate impact on the war. ~~except the attitudes of major participants and their supporters, though the communists would clearly make some diplomatic and propaganda gains.~~ The greatest concern on the allied side would be the possibility of adverse reaction in the US Congress and the consequences thereof. Over the longer term, the possibility of attitudinal shifts on the Laos question in Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi are of greatest concern. The communist states might view US rejection of Souvanna as tantamount to abandonment of its stated objective of a negotiated settlement in Laos.

-6-

SECRET

SECRET

12. The related subject of Souvanna's change-of-heart contains additional problems for the US. In the first instance, it would almost certainly set the stage for a rightist coup effort in Laos which, at worst, could trigger a round of civil strife in Vientiane. In Saigon and particularly in Phnom Penh and Bangkok, Souvanna's move would depress morale and raise new doubts regarding the validity of US policy in Southeast Asia generally.

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